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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet discusses the preparation of students with mental retardation for life in the community. It presents the position of the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC) on the education of students with mental retardation, lists the school experiences that best prepare students for life in the community, examines how views of the role of education for students with mental retardation are changing, discusses whether all students should spend all of their time in regular classrooms, compares integration and inclusion with mainstreaming, points out why placement in an age-appropriate integrated setting is important, addresses the family's role in determining appropriate education programming and placement, notes how preparation for employment is accomplished, and presents ARC's role in facilitating quality education. (JDD)

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The Education of Students with Mental Retardation:
Preparation for Life in the Community

by Michael Wehmeyer, Ph.D.

What is the ARC's position on the education of students with mental retardation?

The purpose of education is to prepare all children and adolescents for success in adulthood. Success must be measured in reference to the individual student, not exclusively by academic levels attained or economic productivity standards. Students with mental retardation need to have experiences with and instruction in skills which enable them to work, live and enjoy life in their community. To accomplish this the ARC believes, as expressed in a 1990 position statement, that schools must adopt certain basic principles:

- o All schools should value all students and include them in all aspects of school life
- o Preparation for life in the community best occurs when all students of different backgrounds and abilities learn and socialize together in classrooms and other school settings;
- o Each student with a disability belongs in an age-appropriate classroom with peers who are not disabled;
- o Each student has the right to receive an individualized education which provides choices, meets the students needs, and offers necessary support, and;
- o Quality education should value and address the concerns of the student and the student's family.

What school experiences best prepare students for life in the community?

To be successful in adulthood all students need to acquire the skills necessary to integrate and be included in their community. This includes having access to services such as stores, post offices and medical facilities. It involves learning to go to movies, participating in social and religious activities and generally becoming an active member of society. Schools can provide these skills to students with mental retardation, at least in part, by providing the opportunity to:

- o Receive an individualized educational program based on their unique characteristics and preferences;
- o Receive instruction based on curricular material which is functional (based on community-oriented needs), and chronologically age-appropriate;
- o Follow the same daily schedule as that followed by all students in their neighborhood school;
- o Participate in recreational and extracurricular programs with sufficient support if necessary;
- o Develop meaningful social interactions with other students;
- o Receive related services, such as speech, physical or occupational therapy, in accordance with individual needs, and;
- o Receive transportation services allowing participation in school activities on the same basis as other students.

How are views of the role of education for students with mental retardation changing?

The implementation of Public Law 94-142 in 1977 marked the beginning of a new era for learners with mental retardation and all students with unique learning needs. It ensured that these students were not excluded from educational services and that services provided were free and appropriate. Since then, however, continued advances in knowledge concerning how to better prepare these students for adult life have led to the continuing evolution of service-delivery approaches. These changes affect the way schools design the educational environment and interpret "least restrictive environment" regarding student placement.

In the years immediately following the implementation of the law, "least restrictive environment" was generally viewed as, in some manner, constituting segregated classrooms for students with mental retardation. However, this interpretation has increasingly been challenged by parents and educators based at least partially on a reexamination of P.L. 94-142. Of particular scrutiny are regulations which state that: "to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who do not have disabilities [Section 121a.550 (1)]" and "removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes *with the use of supplementary aides and services* (our italics) cannot be achieved satisfactorily [Section 121a.550 (2)]."

At the present time there is room for improvement. Nationwide, schools serve about 6 percent of students with mental retardation primarily in regular classrooms, with an additional 24 percent receiving services in a resource classroom (where the student spends part of his/her day in regular classrooms and part in a separate classroom). Seventy percent of students with mental retardation are still served in more restrictive settings. The majority of these students are served in separate classrooms, but 11 percent still receive services in separate schools (*12th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of The Education of the Handicapped Act*, 1990).

Views about the curriculum for students with mental retardation are also changing. Research has indicated that students with mental retardation learn more effectively and retain more skills if the education is provided in "functional" settings, (e.g., learning to shop in a grocery store instead of a simulated setting), or if the skills are presented in functional activities such as acquiring math skills in the context of learning to balance a checkbook (Brown, et al., 1983; Patton, et al., 1989). Schools must base the education of students with mental retardation upon individual, not system needs and discard stereotypes and assumptions which limit learning opportunities to students with mental retardation.

Should all students spend all of their time in regular classrooms?

Education programs for students with mental retardation must be individualized to meet the unique characteristics and needs of each individual. Some students with mental retardation will benefit from instruction outside school environments, such as the aforementioned community-based settings. As such, an appropriate learning environment will not be exclusively in the regular classroom. Other students with mental retardation may require related services which necessitate time out of the regular classroom. The IEP process should identify the appropriate program for each student and determine what arrangement best meets the student's needs.

Nonetheless, all students should be integrated in some way into regular education buildings, classrooms and activities with same-age peers who are not disabled. This does not mean that every student in the regular classroom must learn the same material nor does it mean that students with disabilities enter regular classrooms only for social benefits. It means that with

EC 301702

adequate support, adaptation and respect for individual differences, all students with mental retardation can benefit educationally and socially from integration.

How do integration and inclusion differ from mainstreaming?

Historically, the term "mainstreaming" has been associated with the part-time placement of students with disabilities in classrooms for several purposes, including academic instruction and social interaction. Integration and inclusion), on the other hand, refers to the opportunity for all students to participate in the totality of the school experience. This includes integration into regular classrooms for educational and social opportunities. More than this, however, it means that students with mental retardation need to be provided the chance to participate in all aspects of the school experience, from extracurricular activities such as football games to eating and socializing with peers in the school lunchroom.

Why is integration important?

For students with mental retardation interaction with same age classmates provides role models for educational and social success. Interaction with students who have disabilities through integration can affect the attitudes and expectations of teachers and classmates and help shed stereotypes which limit the student (York, et al., 1989). This, in turn, increases the opportunities available to students with mental retardation as they enter adulthood. When students with and without disabilities grow and learn together, the barriers created by stereotypes and stigmatization are more easily toppled.

The decision whether or not to integrate students reflects societal attitudes or values (Stainback & Stainback, 1988). Including students with mental retardation in all aspects of the school experience is one indicator of the acceptance of people with disabilities within our society. As such, the questions that need to be asked should not be, "Can inclusion work?" or "Is integration a good idea?" Instead, we need to ask how we can make integration work and focus our energies answering this query.

Why is placement in an age-appropriate setting important?

When students with mental retardation are seen only in terms of their "mental age" as reported by a test and not in relation to their actual chronological age, it is difficult to perceive them as adolescents or adults. Instead they tend to be seen as children, with the mental age estimates used to excuse the absence of effective education or integration into activities in which same-age peers are participating. Viewing people with mental retardation as perpetual children is inaccurate and colors the expectations of the public and employers, thus limiting the individual's opportunity for meaningful engagement in post-school life.

Alternatively, when children with mental retardation grow up in schools and classrooms with same-age peers — attend the same football games , form friendships with non-disabled children , and eat in the same lunchroom — they can learn age-appropriate skills, values and attitudes. When provided experiences with age-appropriate activities, they can and do learn adolescent and adult roles. Teachers, peers, colleagues and employers perceive them as adults and, consequently, as potential employees and friends.

What is the parents' and family's role in determining appropriate education programming and placement?

The parents' role is critical. They will be the one consistent factor across their child's educational experience. The most effective tool parents have in assuring an appropriate education for their child is the Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is a legal document which establishes the services necessary for a student's education. Parents and professionals are equal partners in the IEP process. This may not mean equal knowledge of educational terms or procedures, but it does mean equal status in decision-making. Parents have valuable information concerning their son, daughter or family member. The focus upon functional, life-centered education for learners with disabilities requires information pertaining to the student's home, and community experiences and skills. Parents and family members have a wealth of information in this regard and should actively participate in IEP decisions.

How is preparation for employment accomplished in education programs?

Like all other aspects of education, preparation for employment must be individually determined. Amendments to P.L. 94-142 require that a written transition plan be included in the IEP to detail how this is to happen. Some students will need more time to learn specific occupational skills, and instruction may need to begin earlier. However, all students' skills and attitudes relating to work need to be addressed throughout their education. Students should have vocational experiences which enable them to make informed choices and decisions concerning where they want to work as an adult.

What is the ARC doing to facilitate quality education?

The ARC of the United States is committed to promoting an effective, quality education for all learners with mental retardation. The ARC recognizes that to achieve this goal additional resources are required. It is committed to working independently and with others to fulfill these needs. The ARC is increasing awareness of this issue through publications which are distributed to its 1,200 local and state chapters and 140,000 members, most of whom are parents and/or professionals. Additionally, the ARC is committed to exploring collaborations with other groups to increase parental awareness of and involvement in this important movement.

The ARC has had significant impact through legislative advocacy on the content and funding of education and other disability-related federal legislation affecting teacher training, parent and individual rights and judicial decisions. The ARC is dedicated to providing advocacy to meet the needs of learners with disabilities to enhance opportunities for a quality education for all students with mental retardation.

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Additional Resources Available from the ARC:

Selected Resources: Integrated and Inclusive Education, (1991). Selected references concerning documentation of effective integration, best practices and strategies for inclusion and other sources of information.

Public Law 94-142: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (1991). An ***arcfacts*** describing the law which ensures students with mental retardation a free, appropriate education.